Chapter Two

My army career began with another disappointment.

There was a hierarchy in the armored corps as well. Tank units were at the top. APCs, armored personnel carriers, were

Word did not find any entries for your table of contents. At the bottom. The APCs did what the name said. They carried soldiers. They were sometimes called battle taxis – although in Israel at the time, the

“taxis” were lumbering, World War Two-vintage half-tracks.

I did make one of the “good” draft intakes. I reported for duty on the second Sunday of November 1959, three months short of my eighteenth birthday. We were inducted in Tel Hashomer, a converted former British base that is still used for receiving new recruits. It is located in Ramat Gan, on the southeast edge of Tel Aviv. Nowadays, the

processing of recruits takes a few hours. But we were poked and prodded and interviewed for nearly three weeks, though with no obvious effect on who got sent where.

Having been turned down as a fighter pilot, I guess I'd assumed there would be no problem with my second choice. I would learn to drive a tank or operate its' main gun. But virtually all armor recruits

wanted a tank unit. In the end, the allocation was made randomly – two or three to the tanks, a couple to APC units, as the officers proceeded, teenager by teenager, through the alphabet. When my name was read out, I looked up, as the staff sergeant announced I would be doing my basic training near Beersheva, in the Negev, with one of the three battalions in Israel’s armored

force, the Seventh Brigade. The other two battalions were tank forces. Battalion Nine , was APCs.

Our base, called Machaneh Nathan, was about the size of Mishmar Hasharon. It climbed up a big dusty hill on the edge of Beersheva. The battalion commander’s headquarters, the officers’ quarters and an officers’ club were near the top. A little lower down was

the battalion kitchen, and a dining hall very much like on the kibbutz. Then came the tented compounds for each of four APC companies. Ours, the training company, was nearest the bottom of the hill. We were about 100 recruits in all, ten to a tent. The two corporals in charge of us lived in bigger tents,the platoon commander ,2nd Lt. Shmulik, 21, still in his regular service, we saw every

two days or so, and the company commander Major Shweiki,28, a profeesional ,short ,lean professional soldier,of Jerusalem Sepharadic family, who showed up only once a week or so, had his office in a wooden hut off to the side.

I knew that *tironut* – basic training – would be a challenge. But I was not prepared for how grueling it would be. Physically, I was

still a kid. I was five-feet-five ~~four~~-inches tall. I weighed 13~~2~~0 pounds, and by no means all, or even most, of that was muscle. At the beginning, I could just about manage our 15-mile hikes into the desert, with full gear. But the ‘obstacle course’, across the main road from the base, was torture. Years later, one often-repeated myth about my military career was that as a

young officer, I managed to complete the legendary ‘obstacles course’ at Wingate Institute, the Standard bearer of physical education in Israel, at a record time that had never since been broken some 7 minutes.It is true that as an officer , some three years later I was very good at it. But in -tironut~~it in record time~~ t~~. T~~he truth was closer to Goldie Hawn in *Private*

Benjamin. Only in my final weeks of *tironut* did I have enough strength in my arms to hoist myself, with the rifle and the gear over the large concrete~~wooden~~ wall near the beginning ~~end~~ of the course.

The Israeli army was nothing like it is now. It was modeled on the British. Except for our small arms, with locally produced Uzis and Belgian-made FN rifles, we relied almost

exclusively on World War Two-era British weapons and equipment. The ethos was British as well. Nowadays, senior officers, even the chief of staff, wear ordinary army camouflage uniforms. Training regimens are tailored to developing skills directly applicable to fighting a war. Yet during my *tironut*, battlefield skills sometimes seemed almost an afterthought.

We spent hours lining up or preparing for formal inspections, especially when we were due for a visit by the company commander, who was invariably kitted out in British-style dress uniform.

My immediate commander was a corporal named Yishai Levy. He was medium-sizetall,, -leanthin ,—and mean, almost sadisticc. In today's Israel, his version of army discipline would not

only draw complaints – if not from fellow officers, almost certainly from the parents of the young recruits. It’s also against the law. But Yishai was not alone at the time in using his recruits for the raw exercise of personal power. Our seemingly endless inspections were a perfect opportunity for punishment. If you looked close enough, and he did, you could always find something wrong: an

Uzi not quite pristine enough, a wrinkle in a uniform, a scuff on a boot, a lace not quite properly tied. Yishai had two favorite targets. One was a guy named Itzik Gila, later a friend of mine and fellow commando fighter. I was the other.

We never figured out why Yishai singled us out. Both of us were kibbutzniks – a group seen, not without reason, as a

kind of self-selecting elite. But Yishai came from a kibbutz as well. Whatever the impetus, he began very early on to mete out daily punishments on us for perceived oversights at inspection time. Our extra drills were always after nightfall, on a steep, rutted incline about 500 yards long which was used to test-drive tanks which were kept for the brigade’s reserve battalion. We

had to report to him in full battle dress, complete with our 25-pound backpacks. His favorite punishment was to make us carry our steel cots from our tent to the top of the hill. Sometimes, he'd just have us take our small infantry shovels out of our packs and dig a series of deep, perfectly square, holes. It got so bad that the other company

corporalonel, a recent

immigrant from Romania who lived on the same kibbutz as Yishai, tried to get him to stop, even taking his concern up to the platoon commander. The commander asked Gila and me what was going on. “Yeah,” we replied, “it’s true we train after hours.” When he asked why, we said it was nothing special. Just training. We knew that complaining would not be a good career move. Besides,

neither of us wanted to give Yishai the satisfaction of buckling.

There were isolated moments of gratification and achievement. Two weeks after ~~he day~~ we arrived for *tironut*, we learnt the Uzi for the first time. Toward the end of the lesson, on half a dozen of military blankets spread on the ground, we ~~were~~ run through a drill on disassembling and ~~,~~

reassembling the~~and firing an~~ Uzi. To the astonishment of the others, the whole process took me less than ifteen~~ten~~ seconds. But I had the unfair, and not strictly legal, advantage of having practised back in Mishmar Hasharon so many times, with the Uzi we'd taken from the anniversary exhibit. Our desert hikes, and the regular nighttime punishments, did also make me stronger. And I found

one series of exercises, in the dunes around the southern port city of Ashkelon, fascinating and fulfilling. The aim was to hone our skills in planning and reconnaissance. We were split into teams of 2-3, taken to a remote area, some 2-3 miles afar, after nightfall, and told to find our way back to our encampment (the Mediterranean to the west and set of paved roads in other directions made

sure that no one will be totally lost) . It was like what I'd done with Yigal Garber in the orchards of Mishmar Hasharon, and in *Gadna Sayerim.* It demanded finding (?)a mental solution to a physical challenge, rather than just following instructions, or lining up for inspection. It was the part of being a soldier which most energized and interested me. It was also

pretty marginal to the work of a typical APC unit.

Yet then, by mere accident, this was precisely the set of skills that I was called on to demonstrate. And it was not an exercise.

* * *

It would become known as the Rotem Crisis. It erupted in February 1960, four months into

my *tironut*. And for a few days it seemed we were about to go back to war with Egypt.

The first sign I saw that anything extraordinary was going on was the sudden movement of tanks and APCs inside our camp. Officers and troops from the operational Companies~~units~~ were checking the battle-readiness of the equipment. It was obvious this wasn’t just in expectation of a

normal line-up and inspection. At first, no one told the new recruits anything. We were left to look on, and stay out of the way. There was certainly nothing to suggest that, just a few hours later, I would end up playing a part in what was happening.

There had been signs of tension since the start of the year, though primarily in the north, with Syria. Since the

1956 War, Israel had settled into a kind of uneasy cease-fire~~peace~~ with our neighbors. *Fedayeen* attacks continued, but not on the same scale. There was occasional saber-rattling, especially after Nasser brought the Syrians into a notional single-state alliance, called the United Arab Republic, in 1958. In late January 1960, after Syrian shelling from the Golan Heights onto a kibbutz in

the Galilee, soldiers from the Golani Brigade in the north launched Israel's first reprisal attack since 1956, against ~~a~~ Al Taufiq, a fortified village on the southern end of Heights, overlooking the Kibbutzim in the eastern part of Sea og Gallilee. Still, there had been nothing to suggest we were on the brink of a war.

It was only much later that we found out what happened. It began with a warning from the Soviets to Nasser in early February – entirely wrong – that Israel was massing troops for an invasion of Syria. Nasser responded by moving a large part of his army, some two heavy divisions ~~of his army~~ into the center of Sinai, facing our~~toward the~~ border. The real crisis began because

Israel had no idea the Egyptian army had been redeployed. Our Depa~~rtment of~~ Military Intelligence found out purely by chance. The head of intelligence, Chaim Herzog, was attending a diplomatic reception in Tel Aviv. He began chatting with a guest he knew well, the head of the local CIA station. What, the American asked, did he make of the fact that Egypt had moved its two

most battle-ready divisions into Sinai? Herzog was a natural diplomat. He would go on to become our ambassador to the UN. So I’m sure he came up with a suitably woolly reply, about how it was obviously a situation that would have to be monitored. But he left as soon as he could, and told Dayan and Ben-Gurion. When a (reconnaissance flight the next day)[did we have one?.EB]

confirmed the redeployment, Ben-Gurion and his generals scrambled for a response. They were agreed on one thing: they didn’t want a war. But as the army’s then chief of operations, Yitzhak Rabin, put it in an urgent note to the head of the air force: “We’ve been caught with our pants down.”

The failure was just one of a series of such[what were the

others?. EB] setbacks throughout the 1950s, and was less surprising than it may seem. Our embryonic military intelligence department – known in Israel by its Hebrew acronym, Aman – had only a limited capacity to know what was going on in neighboring Arab states. It did have a few agents in place, as did the civilian intelligence organization, Mossad. That was

our main source of information. But we had almost no capacity to tap into enemy communications. We had receiving equipment around Tel Aviv, but no intelligence installations anywhere near our borders. And there was not a lot to tap into, since the Arab armies' own communications networks were fairly primitive. Reconnaissance flights were rare, and far less effective

than they later became. We could not fly high over the Egyptian coast with high-resolution equipment and look diagonally into the Sinai. Usable intelligence required overflights at barely 10,000 feet. And since the 1956 war, a military success that had turned into a diplomatic crisis, Ben-Gurion had been reluctant to approve any action beyond our borders that might

inadvertently provoke another war.

For reasons I've never been able to discover, the codename for Israel's response to Nasser's massing of troops in the Sinai was "broom" – in Hebrew, *rotem*. Ben-Gurion was already worried that the tension with Syria might escalate into a full-scale conflict. He now recognized we would have to deploy some

counter-force in the south, in case it turned out Nasser was planning an attack. But he vetoed the idea of a full mobilization. Instead, he ordered a limited call-up, of about 7,000 reserve soldiers. He placed the air force on alert. And he directed the four brigades responsible for the defense of southern Israel to move within a few miles of the border. One of the forces

(mobilized)/ which should deploy was the Seventh Brigade, since we were based in the south. There was a contingency plan for such a deployment which called for different units, some of them reservists, (the AMX 13 tank unit whose tanks were held in Machane Natan was one of those) which should be called from homes all around the country, to get their tanks and drive to their

pre planned deployment areas along the border. And ~~the~~ battalion~~s~~ Nine in Machaneh Nathan were ordered to dispatch several overnight munitions convoy~~s~~ to few of this barren desrt spots. ~~equip the hastily assembled border force~~.

The problem was that, with our operational units preparing to move forward, there seemed to be no one else on the base with the expertise, experience

and local knowledge to lead the supply columns. Had Yishai Levy been put in charge of solving that problem, I’m sure he would have looked for anyone but me. But we were taken as group to the platoon commander. Lt. Shmulik, with severe face this evening~~He~~ explained the need to get the munitions convoys to a point about a mile in from the border and some ten miles from the closest road or settled

place., and asked: “Any volunteers?” We looked around. None of us raised a hand. “Come on,” he said. “One of you must have grown up around here. That means the first 25 miles will be familiar territory.” He left unspoken the obvious postscript: the need to negotiate the final ~~five to~~ ten miles, through open desert, and to find the right place~~area~~, on our side of a border that

wasn’t even marked. Still, no one raised his hand. “Can’t *any* of you,” he barked, “lead a convoy of a ~~few~~ dozen trucks?”

I’m not sure what possessed me. But I thought to myself: yes, I probably can. I had been scouting and navigating in one way or another since those first evenings with Yigal in the kibbutz orchards. I’d trained with *Gadna Sayerim*. And while I’d never lived in the

Negev, the moshav Patish farmland that I had worked with Yigal after getting kicked out of high school was near the route the convoy would take.

So I raised my hand.

“Can you lead a convoy?” he asked.

Yes, sir,” I said. “~~Of course,~~ I’ll need a map, Of course. And a compass. But if you can give me that, I think I can.”

“Why do you think you can?” he prodded. I’d done *Gadna Sayerim*, I replied. I was OK~~good~~ with maps. “Okay,” he said, and he sent me to report to Shweiki, the Company commander who just took me up the hill, ~~with two of the company’s officers to report~~ to the battalion commander Office.

~~When~~ I entered the Office behind Shweiki~~his~~. I’d never been there before and Shweiki

practically did’nt even know me. ~~office,~~ I was surprised to see the Battalion Cdr.~~he~~ wasn’t much taller than I was. But he was built like a bull. Someone must have phoned ahead, because he was clearly expecting us. Still, I could see the surprise in his eyes when he looked at me: only just turned eighteen, but looking closer to 15, my uniform sagging on my slender frame. He looked at Shweiki~~the~~

~~officers~~, then back at me, then at Shweiki ~~the officers~~ again, as if trying to judge from Shweiki's~~their~~ degree of confidence whether he was about to approve something utterly crazy. But what choice did he have? A total of three convoys had to be sent out in the next couple of hours. So far, with me, he had a sum total of one guy to lead them. Whatever his doubts, he still had to find

two more soldiers for the other ones.

“Fine,” he said, and waved us out of his office.

The column consisted of a dozen of~~eight~~ huge, American-made six-wheelers, each packed with ten tons of munitions and other supplies. I was in the lead truck. The driver was an Administration Company soldier, not really trained in anything but road driving ~~reservist in~~

~~his mid-30s~~. So were most of the troops in the rest of the transports, one driver and another soldier in each. A staff sergeant, riding in the second vehicle, was in theoretical command. But, surreal though it felt, I was actually in charge – by virtue of the fact that I was the only person who might, conceivably, get us to the right place.

The first part wasn’t hard.

~~There was still an hour or so of daylight~~

. It was already night but we drove on paved roads which all were on the map. W~~w~~**e rumbled through Beersheva and turned west, through a tiny agricultural settlement called Eshel Hanasi, skirting the Negev military training base at** Ze’e~~Tzehi~~**lim and on to the kibbutz** ~~of~~ **Gvulot. It was paved**

roads until then. Even for a mile ~~or two~~ after that, as we cut south and then west toward the border, we were on a well-packed dirt road. But then we got into the open desert. Since the area was often used for tank training exercises, there were tracks on the sand. But the problem was that there were dozens of tank tracks, going off in all directions. It was moonless night those hours and

total dark around. The danger was getting fooled, by the parallel beams of light from the convoy’s headlights, into thinking we were going straight when we weren’t. About a mile into the desert I ordered the drivers of all six-wheelers to dim the lights to the minimum possible, so that I can see the stars (we were heading west south west, so I couls continuously watch the North

star from the right side of the cabin, where I was sitting) for general direction and at least vaguely, the contour of the landscape around~~also getting dark~~. **My map and compass did give me a general idea of** the direction ~~where~~ **we were heading, although I quickly discovered that taking a** compass **reading inside the truck was useless. The mass of metal distorted the reading. So**

every few minutes, I waved the convoy to a halt, got out, walked fifty or sixty yards into the sand and the lone ~~clumps of~~ **acacia trees, and took a reading there**, having a further look at stars position and climbed back into the six-wheeler.

I could also keep a check our general direction from the position of the stars. So there was at least no danger we'd end

up back at Machaneh Nathan, or heading towards~~in the middle of~~ Gaza. Yet with the need to slightly weave around~~in and out~~ ~~of~~ the dunes and shallow waddis, the odometer on the truck gave me~~us~~ only a rough idea of the distance we were covering. And without roads, we had to make sure we were going in a fairly straight line. ~~I could get a pretty good idea of whether we were veering off~~

~~line by allowing myself to feel the feedback from our massive tires as we plowed ahead through the sand. The danger was getting fooled, by the parallel beams of light from the convoy's headlights, into thinking we were going straight when we weren't. About a mile into the desert, I told all of the six-wheelers dim their lights.~~ At a couple of points, I realized we had wandered

slightly off line, not enough to be obvious at first but still enough to point us significantly south of the spot we were looking for. Since the border, such as it was, angled in towards Israel the further south it went, that risked our inadvertently crossing it and ending up inside Egypt. I assumed that wouldn’t actually start a war. Yet it would certainly open us up to getting

intercepted, and fired on or risk being~~at least~~ detained, by the Egyptians. But every time we wandered a bit off line, I stopped, got out, tried to recalculate our position from the compass and the stars, and we set off again. It took slightly more than three hours in all, but finally I signaled the convoy to a halt. I climbed out of the truck, walked back

to the staff sergeant, and told him: “We’re here.”

In fact, I had no way of knowing for sure. There was no landmark to look for. I felt we were generally in the right place. But my –compass and the mapstars were not a GPS. We were in an empty desert, at night. What we could see of it looked the same, whether on our side or the Egyptians’ of the frontier. Before we had set off

from Machaneh Nathan, I was briefed in our battaliom Cdr. office by the officer in charge of one of the reservists operational APC battalions. He had been to the area before, on training exercises. Because of the emergency call-up, he was too senior to lead the supply convoy himself. But he told me that once we got to the place, we should stop and wait. He would follow our tracks the

next morning and link up with us, to confirm we’d got it right.

> I made sore the sergant officer prdered a guard sequence among us so that one of us will be awake on guard at each moment. I was the first. But somehow didn’t fall asleep afterwards. Probably worried that the guard sequence will be cut by someone falling asleep on guard. We were too close to

the border , and probably identified. Finally fatigue defeated me and I ~~We~~ grabbed a few hours' sleep. S~~and, s~~ure enough, soon after sunrise we saw the officer's jeep bobbing over the sand towards us. He pulled to a stop. He shook hands with the staff sergeant. Then he turned to me.

"Unbelievable," he said. "We're exactly where we need to be."

If this were a Hollywood movie, there would now be a neat, linear progression between my modest navigational triumph and my escape from the prospect of spending the next couple of years driving an APC. But this was still the army_ [should’nt we use consistently Zahal or IDF?.EB]. I was just a teenage recruit. There were some subtle signs of approval when I got back to the base.

The platoon commander patted me on the back. The other squad commanders looked at me somewhat differently than before. For a few days, Yishai even stopped marching me and Gila out for punishment duty. The main change was inside me, however. I now knew that there *were* things in the army I would be good at, challenges I'd find motivating, ways in which I

might make a difference/contribution.

Yet I had no idea how I could make that case to~~—~~ anyone~~those who decided these things~~. I had been assigned to APCs. I figured I would have to reconcile myself to staying there.

Then, barely six weeks later, I got lucky again.

* * *

According to army regulations each soldier had a five days’ leave. On my second one ~~Under army regulations, every recruit got five days’ leave about halfway through basic training.~~ ,sShortly before the Passover holiday, I headed north to Mishmar Hasharon. Though I still had trouble imagining the next couple of years baking inside

an APC in the Negev, I can’t deny that the idea of returning to the kibbutz, in uniform, at least a bit stronger and bulkier than before, made me feel a sense of pride. I was also very, very tired. I spent the first couple of days at home mostly sleeping.

On the third night, I was in the dining hall with a half-dozen schoolmates-turned-soldiers when a guy named

Avraham AmRamon sat down and joined us. He was a *yeled chutz from Ashkelon*, one of the “boys from outside” who had joined our class when we were pulled out of the regional high school, and we’d become fairly good friends. He, too, was now in the army and as we were finishing dinner, he asked: “How’s your *tironut*?”

“Hard,” I replied. “Boring.”

He smiled, and then said: “How would you feel about joining a *sayeret*?”

The question took me completely by surprise. In Hebrew, *sayeret* meant “reconnaissance unit”. It was the name given to elite forces within an army unit which specialized in independent operations, to be executed behind enemy lines or under tougher , more demanding than

ususal, type of conditions. Nowadays, there are nearly a dozen of them. Then, mid-1960' there were only two of any note. One was *Sayeret Golani*, the strike force of the Golani Brigade and the unit which had launched the retaliation attack into Syria a few months earlier. The truly elite one was *Sayeret Tzanhanim*, which grew up out of Company A of battalion 890, where Yigal

Garber was a soldier from 54’-56’ and fought under Meir Har-Zion, and his successors~~Company A of Battalion 890, the force set up under Arik Sharon in the 1950s and which Yigal Garber had fought in.~~

“Which *sayeret*?” I asked.

“It’s called *Sayeret Matkal*,” Ammon~~vraham~~ said. [the name Avraham will confuse the reader with Avraham Arnan. EB]

I'd never heard of it. Almost no~~No~~ one had at the time. The name didn't help either. "*Matkal*" was simply the Hebrew word for the army general staff. So I asked him what *Sayeret Matkal* did.

"I can't tell you, I'm afraid," he said. "But are you interested?"

The air of mystery only made it seem only more enticing. And no matter what this unknown

sayeret did, I knew it would be a step up from what lay ahead of me in the Negev.

"Yeah. Sure," I said.

The sense of intrigue deepened when, the day before I returned to my unit, Ido and Moshe showed up in the dining hall. Since they were older, already for a year in Battalion 890, they had just completed squad commanders course in Batt. 890 (however,

not in Sayeret Tzanhanim) and considered for officers' course.(which both of them later did.~~completed their *tironut* and were serving in the parachutists' brigade, though not its *sayeret*~~. Still, I figured they might at least have heard of the unit Ammon~~vraham~~ had mentioned. When I asked them about *Sayeret Matkal*, in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could muster, Moshe,

eyebrows arched, said: “What? why do you ask? They want *you*?” No, I assured them. I was just curious.

The only thing that they knew for sure was that the unit existed.Moshe approached me the next day and told me that a year ago ,at the end of theirTironut in 890, some 6-8 soldiers left the Company without any explanation and disappeared. Some of them

educsted in Kibbuyzim, some where ***Ironim***, from the cities. But they had a common denominator, they all came from sepharadic families who immigrated from the arab world some ten years earlier, or spoke Arabic from home. ~~A friend from their parachute company, an Arabic-speaking Jew from Yemen named Zacharia, had just disappeared one morning.They figured he'd had~~

~~enough, or had transferred to another unit~~. A few months later, during squad commanders course, their company was on accelerated march along the border with Jordan at the Judea part of the West Bank west of Hebron when they spotted a Bedouin ~~they were on a training exercise near the West Bank. They spotted a~~ shepherd, his face covered~~hidden~~ by a keffiyeh, wandering out with

his small flock from the hills of Hebron and coming very close to the border with Israel. They shouted at him to stop. When he did, they went over to interrogate him. They pulled aside the keffiyeh. It was Zacharia Madar, a Yemmenite, educated in Kibbutz Hulata, who was one of the “disappearsd”.. He smiled. He told them to say nothing, and he turned back into Jordan.Ido joined us he

was ther in the march as well.

“*He* is in Sayeret Matkal,” Ido said. “Who knows what they do, but there’s all sorts of rumors. Like when they train, they have to go into Gaza, see a movie, and come back with the ticket stub to prove they’ve been there.”

“They want *you*?” Moshe asked again.

The fact was that I didn’t really know. For a couple of

weeks after I got back to Beersheva, I heard nothing. But on a Friday morning at the end of April, I got an order~~word~~, through Shmulik, the platoon commander, that I was to report to the army's main personnel headquarters. It was on an army base in Ramat Gan~~, not far from the place where I'd first reported for duty six months earlier~~. In 1948, it had been the army's command

headquarters, but that had now been moved into a compound in the heart of Tel Aviv known as the *kirya*. The base was on a hill, with a handful of two-story buildings that had rows of offices on either side of a long corridor. But there were also several smaller wooden huts mounted on concrete bricks. My instructions were to go to one of these huts, the offices of a department~~unit~~

called *Maka Eser* – the personnel department for military intelligence.

I got there late in the afternoon. I was greeted by two men in civilian leisure cloth~~–camouflage fatigues~~. Both in their late 20s. One of them, shorter even than I was, introduced himself as Sami Nachmias. The other – tall, slim, and with a surprisingly quiet voice – said: “I’m

Shmill(short for Shmuel) Ben-Zvi.” I knew both names. Many among ~~Almost every~~ 1950s kibbutz teenager did. Ben-Zvi, an officer had been a member~~part~~ of Arik Sharon’s Unit 101. Nachmias was one of the earliest recruits to its successor commando force, Company A in the paratroop battalion. Each of them shook my hand. Without further explanation, they motioned me

into the back seat of a military Jeep in civilian colors and plate, parked in front of the hut. Ben-Zvi drove, with Nachmias in the passenger seat. There was no mention of Sayeret Matkal, in fact no mention of how, or why, I'd been asked to come see them. ~~They alternated asking me questions about nearly everything except the army: the kibbutz, school, sports,~~

~~friends.~~ “where are you from?” Shmill asked “I’m from MH”, I answered.“So you know Fefe?” Nachmias wondered. “Who is Fefe?” I responded. They look at each other. “His name is Yigal Garber” they threw at me. I never knew Yigal had such a fuuny nickname in Company A. But I did not know why they asked it and what they know or want, so I just said “uh, I know him well”. They kept

alternated asking me questions about nearly everything except the army: the kibbutz, school, sports. Then, Ben-Zvi stopped the jeep, ~~pulled over, cut the engine,~~ turned around to see~~face~~ me better and asked~~said~~: “Is it true you can pick locks?”

“Yes”~~,~~ I replied, “I can”. ([EB.I did NOT.Taking my ever-ready picks out of my pocket, I said: “Do you me to show you?”

He said that wasn’t necessary. He just wanted to know.).EB]

“Is it true you can navigate? Read maps?” Nachmias asked.

“Yes, I can”, I said.

“Did you learn it in Battalion Nine?” ~~tironut~~?” he asked.

“No. Gadna Sayarim” I answered. ~~Gadna Sayerim.”~~

The questioning was over. We drove back into the base in silence. They ushered me out of

jeep. And Nechmias said: “OK. You probably will hear from us.”

For another couple of weeks, I heard nothing. But as basic training was winding down, I got further instructions: to report this coming Saturday morning to an address, 5, HaSavion street ~~on Savyon Street~~ in Tzahala, the neighborhood in north Tel Aviv where a lot of military

officers lived. It was a small home, with a metal gate outside, several stolen old stones from Arab deserted villages and a carefully tended garden. I was met at the door by a man in shorts and T-shirt, about 30, who introduced himself as Avraham Arnan. He was of medium height, square-jawed, with a scar running down one cheek which seemed to say:

this man is a soldier, a guy who has seen real battle.

He led me inside. We sat at a low table on the edge of his living room. He unfurled a map of Jerusalem and the surrounding hills. He pointed to a spot on the southwest of the city. Then he drew a curving line with a pencil~~his finger,~~ through some four inches apart (10 km on the map),~~gh~~ the hills, to a second

point. “You know how to read a map?” he asked. When I nodded, he said: “I want you to describe to me – just as if you were walking on this line I showed you – exactly what you see, as you make your way to the place I marked.” I used the elevation lines on the map as a guide, and the positioning of the individual hills and woods and villages, and I imagined how each stage on the walk

would look. When I was finished, his only response was non-verbal: the hint of a smile. When he spoke, it wasn’t about the map. It was – again – about picking locks. “How did you learn?” he asked. I explained how I’d cut into the locks, how I’d figured out how they worked, and then made a set of tools to open them. “Thank you,” he said. “You can return to your unit.”

Though he hadn’t said so – though he hadn’t said much of anything – I had a sense that I’d just had the Sayeret Matkal equivalent of my final interview. But I was now entering my last week of *tironut*. When I got to Beersheva, I dug around, as discreetly as possible, for details about Avraham Arnan. I learned that he had indeed been in battle. He had fought as a

young officer in the 1948 war, in the hills around Jerusalem. He would have known the terrain I'd described to him in his living room. That, I guessed, explained the half-smile. Still, the waiting for my formal orders was hard. I had no idea whether I'd be spending the next couple of years learning how to drive an armored personnel carrier – or in a *sayeret* whose actual

function was a mystery, beyond the fact that its commanders seemed bizzarely~~most~~ interested in whether I could open a padlock.

I never got any official word. Yet the day before the end of basic training, I was told to return to *Maka Esser* in Ramat Gan. A Jeep, military colors and plate, this time was waiting. An ordinary soldier was at the wheel. He said

nothing, beyond a gruff hello, and proceeded to drive me to a place about 15 minutes away. It was a sprawling military base, not far from the international airport in Lod to the east of Tel Aviv. It had been built by the British in the Second World War for the RAF. Since 1948, the main part of the base – dozens of buildings, and its hard-packed dirt training areas, skirted by fringes of

tall trees – had been converted into Israel's officer-training college. The airbase was still there, however, along with a dozen old, wooden Mosquito fighters and a few prop-driven tiny transport planes used for air force training. At the very far end of the base, set back from a criss-cross of runways, was a jumble of other structures. A pair of domed concrete shelters, like stunted

tunnels, that had been used by the British for munitions storage. There were five~~our~~ tents, each of which could house a dozen people. Two field toilets. ~~A large, high-roofed building which had been a hangar.~~ And a single-story long bricks built house with tin roofed pave way (colonnade/portico?) at its front side ~~woode~~which was ~~n hut,~~ containing offices: for

Avraham Arnan, his two main operational officers, and a secretary. A small dining hall with adjacent kitchennete. And last room for weapons and equipment.

This was the home of Sayeret Matkal, although the first thing I learned was that no one, outside a handful of senior officers in army headquarters, was supposed to know it existed. When we

entered the main gate at the base and the guard asked where we were going, we were told to reply with a codename Avraham had come up with: *Kav Chamesh*: “Line Five.” It was the name of the bus route that crosses through many interesting sites in Tel Aviv.~~between Tel Aviv and Petach Tikvah, the suburb whose least well-off neighborhoods lay just beyond the perimeter fence~~.

* * *

There is no way to describe what Sayeret Matkal was like at the beginning without explaining how, and why, it came to be. Its heart and soul, and its founding commander, was Avraham Arnan.

[I yhink we have to add some pwrsonal history of Arnran to make more ‘alive.EB]

Despite his scar from the 1948 war, I soon discovered he was not a natural battlefield officer. He took only a glancing interest in military detail. But he was an extraordinary charismatic leader. With dilutingthick dark hair (and dapper, almost movie-star,) handsome looks, he had a lively and original mind, an infectious smile, and a playful disregard for the regimens and

regulations that governed the rest of the army. He also had an ability to inspire dedication and loyalty in those he rallied around him.

Following 48’ war, and after a short interlude with the University, Avraham, who was not attracted, or did not feel extremely natural in battle, found himself in Unit 154, which was a Military

Intelligence unit, dealing with operating Arab agents, in the neighboring countries , through the quite porous borders of Israel. It was directed from a HQ in Tel Aviv but spread/deployed in several small bases, of few people each around the actual borders. Avraham found himself in the Nahariya, and later Safad/ Tzfat bases of 154, dealing

with operating of agents in Lebanon and Syria respectively.

It was boring. In a way petty. The agents could be a smuggler, a criminal, a retired gandamaire, or low level official. Each had some relatives or contacts which could potentially yield some information, even interesting information. which is always better than nothing. But you could not expect to be more

than a minor piece in a big puzzle. Not an ***answer*** for the challenge of early warning. Avraham was bohemian, deep in his soul, a man of many friends, of both genders. Some of his closest ones were Air Force Pilots ,Yak Nevo, and Tzuk. They made him aware of the crucial role early warning can have on both defensive as well as pre-emptive missions of the air force. When Avraham in

early 57’, started to contemplate these issues, the sobering impact of “Rotem” was still three years afar into the unrolling carpet of the future.

But the scars of the past were still fresh on the minds of All. And many obstacles waiting down the stream.

_

[In regard to the following paragraph:Sayeret Matkal can not be presented as a fully

conceived idea which was implemented. It was gradual, successful process. And even the very idea developed graduaally. EB]([EB.(to be replaced by the preceeding paragraph?.EB]Avraham was a visionary, and he conceived of Sayeret Matkal as an antidote to a dangerous weakness in Israel’s security: our inability to get advance intelligence on military

threats from beyond our borders)).

The Rotem Crisis was just the latest reminder of this vulnerability. Being “caught with your pants down” would have been a cause for concern in any army. In Israel, the implications were especially heavy. When Ben-Gurion framed Israel’s defense strategy after 1948, he realized that a small,

young nation, struggling to get on its feet economically, couldn’t rely on a sizable standing army. Instead, we had a professional core that amounted only to about 2530,000 people at the time of Rotem. Most of our military consisted of reservists: soldiers and officers who had completed their service, and spent a brief period each year re-familiarizing themselves with

their infantry weapons, tanks, APCs and aircraft. If we did have to fight a war, the assumption was that we could bring our forces up to full strength within 24 to 48 hours. Yet for this to work, we had to have reliable Early Warning, some breathing space. We had to know if an attack was coming. Early warning was essential.

With the absence of long-range eavesdropping capability,

and the limitations of our air reconnaissance, and the inherent unreliability of human sources, it was easier said than done. The Birth of The Unit was the culmination of long process which included on one hand a clear challenge , namely to provide a highly credible early warning capabilities (to a nation whose security was based on a triangle made of: Small nucleus of Standing Armed

Forces, Big force made of reservists who should be mobilized on time, to assure victory. And Early Warning capabilities, to cover that Gap).The insights, mainly those of Arnan grew up gradually along a path of frustrations from the present circumstances and scars from past experiences. No one, including Avraham Arnan, could see it fully in advance.

[to be added later on.EB. His great contribution ended up being that he was the first to shape a clear vision, nurturing it, modifying it, making it something workable. He was struggling with administrative, budgetary, operational and ‘internal politics’ challenges. He did it along more than five years, tenaciously, without ever giving up. He did it In

spite of the fact that he was ridiculed behind his back for his dreams and pretensions and although he started to work when the whole idea was not yet fully ripe operationally, and did not have, neither technological feasibility to back it, nor ripeness (for those very aforementioned reasons) on the decision making echelons- to make the decision to use it.EB].

((?)Avraham wanted to train a small force of Israelis to be able to cross, undetected, into Arab states on intelligence missions. On the face of it, the idea made perfect sense. The need was obvious. But he faced opposition not only from our army commanders, but from Ben-Gurion and the ~~governmen~~government(?~~t~~)).

[I would comtinue here the text we left at the middle of page 98. And later see how the rest of what we have in 99-107 can fit in.EB]

The mood in early 57’ in regard to operations behind the State borders (in fact, cease fire lines, there were no ***real*** borders) was gloomy at best. Just few month ago the withdrawal from whole Sinai had been completed, under US and

Soviet pressure(an area three times bigger than whole Israel) signaling to BG as well as Dayan and others the limits of power of the young State, and its vulnerability to external pushes when it over reacts. For some five years BG and later Eshkol, both, as PM and MoD simultaneously, practically did not let any ground operation to cross the borders, beyond very rare excursions at extremely

remote and empty corners of the map.

Secondly a pre 56’ event which stemmed out directly from the attempt to cross the border for intelligence gathering had its impact on BG as well as The Ramatkals and political leaders. All of them were still traumatized by an earlier,(and even more) painful, intelligence setback. (than Rotem.)[Rotem is not fully

relevant here. First, it had not yet happened. More important, Rotem shock was because of something we did not know. Sort of Passive shock with high potential consequences . In order to avoid it you have probably to DO something actively. The Uri Ilan related shock was the result of the OPPOSITE. Namely, critics would say, and leaders felt, that we over acted.

> Probably in a reckless or at least unprofessional manner.
>
> So the lesson from the former is “let’s do something”. The lessom from the latter is “think twice or thrice before you do anything”.EB]

It happened in 1954. It was the first – and last – time before Sayeret Matkal that Israeli soldiers had crossed into an Arab country on an intelligence mission. The

target was Syria. It had top priority, because at least our southern border with the Egyptians consisted of a large, and largely flat, expanse of desert. In the north, our towns and settlements were crouched underneath Syria’s Golan Heights: a 1,500-foot-high volcanic plateau rising towards the 9,000-foot peak which we called Mount Hermon. In Arabic, it was known as *Jebel al-*

Sheikh, the old man’s mountain, for its frosting of snow. Given the frailty of our air reconnaissance, if Syria began preparations for war, we risked being left blind to sudden forward troop movements on the Golan. Nor would we have any way of knowing if Syrian planes took off from their bases near Damascus, just a few dozen miles back from the Heights,

until they were bearing down on Israel.

By 54’, The technological unit of the~~attached to~~ Israeli military intelligence had developed an eavesdropping device that could be placed on telephone poles on the Golan, so that we could intercept Syrian military communications. The men chosen to go in and install the apparatus were uniquely qualified. They were

taken from the one unit in the army with experience of cross-border operations on Arab soil: Company A Battalion 890., the successor to Unit 101.

The man selected to lead the five-man infiltration team was more qualified for the task than anyone in Israel. Meir Har-Zion was only 21 at the time. But his reputation within the military, when it came to operational skills, outstripped

even Sharon’s, and ~~nearly~~ rivaled that of the then-chief of staff, Moshe Dayan. Dayan would later call Har-Zion “our finest commando, our best soldier ever.” Tall and lanky, Meir was born in Moshav Rishpon, near Tel Aviv but had moved as a teenager to the kibbutz of Ein Harod in the Galilee, where he soon developed a great and a small ~~twin~~ passions: The great one

was knowing the land: Israel , as well as neighbors. The smaller one was writing . About his own fascinating hiking adventures. But also, from time to time, some poetry.

~~writing poetry and H~~hiking into the countryside carried out usually with his younger sister, Shoshana or a friend.. They had a particular fondness for sneaking across into Syria or Jordan. Twice,(?) the two of

them were captured by the Syrians. They were let go the first time, perhaps because Shoshana was only 13, but on the second occasion, in 1951, their release required delicate negotiations through the UN. Still undaunted, soon afterwards Meir –trekked 3025 miles into Jordan on what had become almost a post-1948 ‘pilgrimage dream’ site for the more venturesome of young

Israeli soldiers: to the breathtaking, red-stone Nabatean city of Petra. Nearly a dozen youngsters lost their lives trying to make the trek in the 1950s, easy prey for Bedouin.very very few succeeded. But Meir, 17, teamed up with a redoubtable former Palmach battlefield fighter and reconnaissance soldier~~scout~~ named Rachel S~~I~~z~~~~vorai, a woman at her mid 20's. They took a

different route, through a maze of nearby mountains, and approached Petra from the _ south east. Their feat made the two of them something like folk heroes among Israeli youth.

Now, late on a spring night in 1954, he his team onto the Golan. They rigged the bugging unit to the top of a telephone pole 2~~a~~ miles from the Syrians' main northern base on the Heights. They buried the bulky

transmitter at the foot of the pole, and made their way back into Israel. And it worked. Israel could hear enough~~all~~ Syrian military communications on the Golan to feel the pulse of events and significantly improve early warning there..

The hitch was that, with the limits of 1950s technology, the transmitter batteries needed to be replaced every three~~four or five~~ weeks. Twice or three

times more, in the summer and autumn of 1954, he and his team sneaked back into Syria. But Meir was still a key part of Israel's commando operations.

He was in charge of Company A. And the operation of replacing the batteries began to look somewhat rutine. You do not need a Har Zion for routine operations. And there were other units as well, Sayeret Golani for example which

demanded ***their*** share of cross border operatonal activities.~~There had to be a danger that, sooner or later, the Syrians would intercept one of the Golan missions. The last thing Dayan wanted was to lose Meir Har-Zion while he was trying to replace a few batteries in a transmitter. So he passed over the task to the Golani Brigade.~~

In December 1954, a “passing the torch” operation was planned where three ~~me~~soldiers~~n~~ from Company A – led by an NCO, ~~one its deputy commander,~~ Meir Yacobi – joined three members of the Golani Brigade for a joint mission of replacing the batteries on~~to~~ the Heights. The idea was to have Yacobi, who had been on the earlier operations, operate/ teach them, alongside

Lt. Meir Mozes, ~~the men~~ from the Golani Brigade who would be taking over the mission from then on, in the future.. The p reparation ~~lanning~~ and execution, however, were a shambles. The unit did not conduct a joint live fire exercises before setting off. There was latent, subconscious also ~~confusion~~ about who was in charge. Formally and in practice ~~Technically~~, since the

head of the Golani team, Lieutenant Meir Moses, outranked Yacobi, he was in charge. But unlike Yacobi, he hadn’t been on the earlier operations, did not know the ground or the way. Moreover, Yaacobi had been a seasoned fighter, with a lot of actual battle experience, which Moses did not have. Barely a half-mile onto the Heights, they were intercepted by a Syrian

ambush~~patrol~~. Had this been a pure~~ commando operation,~~ Company A’s team, the “101 rules” would have applied: if you were surprised by a close distance ambush, you turn immediately(right or left), open fire and charge on them.– ~~discovered~~, you ask~~ed~~ no questions, gave no answers. You opened fire. It was a fighting trait of that Unit and worked once and again. But mixed up

small size unit, which did not trained enough together and never had the opportunity to develop the bond that keep fighters committed, facing enemy fire is a well known source of troubles and tragedies. When surprised by the Syrian ambush shouts to raise hands, and drop their weapons, T~~t~~he Golani officers' orders were not clear, or not heard and the Golanis, ~~when~~

~~told by the Syrian patrol to drop their weapons and lie down,~~ get confused and obeyed. Yacobi and his Company A commandos did not open fire as well, out of confusion. ~~but in the ensuing chaos, E~~everyone was captured. They were taken to Damascus. Each was held in solitary confinement. They were beaten. They were repeatedly threatened with hanging (?), and were told the others had

already told everything they knew. Which was partially true. Even that they'd been executed(?).

[I suggest we erase it. BG could reasonably believe he might be able to reduce the profile of Rotem by using censorshipWhen the Rotem crisis happened five years later, Ben-Gurion used British-era censorship regulations to keep it out of the newspapers. But

he couldn’t hide the debacle on the Heights. The Syrians could expose it at their will. And oOne of the captured Golani Brigade soldiers was a 19-year-old named Uri Ilan. He was the oldest child of Fayge Ilanit, a member of the Knesset who Ben-Gurion and the whole of parliament knew personally. The captivity, and torture, dragged on for weeks. The Israelis would not return home until

March 1956. By then, Uri Ilan had committed suicide. He hanged himself with a bedsheet. But he had managed to secrete a note into his uniform. It was found when the body was prepared for burial. It read:

> *Lo bagadeti*.Nekama” “I did not betray anything. Revenge” It was written by small pricks/holes in the shape of the eleven letters he used. he made on a piece of paper

Meir Yacobi ~~did finally~~ decide~~d, after realizing that the Syriana know about the device,~~ to lead the Syrians to the bugging device. He knew that the buried transmitter had been booby-trapped with explosives, which he planned to detonate when he and the Syrians got there. It would be suicide of a different sort, and at least the Syrians wouldn’t get hold of the

transmitter. But the detonator didn’t work.

> NO one had ever made a formal decision or announcement in regard to the consequences of Uri Ilan. But judging by the behavioral the apparent shock persisted for long, long time, along which one was ready to find himself responsible for ~~Ever since then, the word had gone out, from Ben-Gurion himself: under no~~

circumstances, were Israeli soldiers mightto be put at risk of what had happened to Uri Ilan. He knew this meant forfeiting the only practical means of obtaining real-time information on what enemy forces were doing. Any doubt of that had now been erased by Rotem I t was clear that certain achievements might not be possible without taking risks. But BG and he, and his

military commanders too, felt that the price of possible failure in cross-border intelligence missions was too high. While the technological unit had now developed a slightly more compact bugging device, with longer battery life, servicing the equipment would still require cross-border missions every few weeksmonths.

Israel had not abandoned infiltration operations altogether. But using Israeli soldiers was off limits. They were run by military intelligence's Unit 154. Avraham Arnan, now in 154, Tzfat basis, decided in early 57', ~~which~~ to employ a group of ~~trained Arab operatives: mostly~~ Druze ~~shepherds or~~ smugglers in the north; he first gave them a mission to hide military

EQUIPMENT IN A CAVE ON ToP OF MOUNT HERMON LOOKING OVER DAMASCUS BASIN. THE INTENTION WAS TO DEPLOY THERe equipment, so that during emergency periods, an observation team who could deploy there and report, in real time, to our air force on preparation for take off in some 4 different military airbases which could be seen, in good weather, from there. Thus saving some two

minutes of war time early warning before the radar can pick them after takeoff. They deployed the equipment in the cave. So, following those successes Arnan decided to train them to put on the bugging/evasdropping device. On the way to their first operation, not far from their Syrian (then) village of Majdal Shams, the Druze squad was intercepted. Fire opened. In

the exchange one of the team was killed. Another one, severly wounded and blinded by his wounds, was carried for hours on mountainous mule tracks by his team members back to Israel. This was their last operation.

In other bases of 154, some~~other~~ Israeli Arabs who had served prison time for civil offenses like burglary; or Arabs who had infiltrated *into*

Israel and were detained, turned and sent back. But repeated attempts at using these agents to plant the bugging devices failed, first in Syria, then on the West Bank and finally in Gaza. The West Bank mission ended in farce. It was assigned to what Unit 154 jokingly(the joke carries meaning only in Hebrew where the acronym of its name happenrd to be the same as the

person’s, Hssein Mittlaq, name) dubbed Squad Number 10. In fact, it consisted of a single member. He was a career housebreaker who had been jailed in Israel, but most feared being arrested in Jordan,(probably for suspected armed burglary or murder attempt) the scene of an earlier string of burglaries. Unit 154 got him released from Israeli prison. They trained

him on installing the intercept device at the top of a telephone pole and burying the transmitter. He crossed the border after nightfall. By midnight, he managed to install the equipment. By the time he got back, next morning, to 154 localmilitary headquarters in Petah TikvahTel Aviv, the bug was actually working. It *kept* working, until about 11 o’clock (the following morning), when

it suddenly stopped.

Apparently, the owner of the olive grove next to the telephone pole spotted a single, thin isolated wire hanged from the ceramic made isolator on the top of the pole and ending in the ground near the base of it.~~tangle of wires~~.

He called the Jordanian police.

They snipped the wires and removed the device.~~ Luckily for them, they didn’t discover the~~

~~transmitter – assuming, that is, the detonator would have worked this time.~~

[The Gaza operation, occurred much later. When I was already in the Unit, move it to when Amit took over Aman,.EB]The Gaza operation was even more discouraging. It was the last of the attempts and was launched after Rotem, just a few weeks before(NOT accurate) the end of my

tironut. Israel had a well-established network of agents and informers in Gaza. The technological unit had by now also made advances. They had managed to pack the eavesdropping device, the transmitter and the battery pack into a single unit within the ceramic made isolator to which the ground line was attached on the pole. The most experienced of our Gaza agents

was chosen for the mission. He was trained and sent back into Gaza, but they never heard from him again. It turned out he was a double agent. Not only had the Egyptians escape being bugged. They had the latest example of Israeli intercept machinery.

* * *

When I arrived in Sayeret Matkal in May 1960, it had, technically, been existence for t~~hree~~wo and half years. Around one year in its present basis, with regular soldiers, allocated after selection, for this Unit. But it had yet to carry out a single operation, and there was no sign of that changing any time soon. Avraham Arnan was quite aware , but deeply frustrated by the daily

difficulties he met.~~had no illusions about the scale of the task he was taking on.~~

(?)(The ~~national~~ shudder felt when Uri Ilan’s suicide note was published still reverberated. Yet he never doubted that, sooner or later, Israel’s leaders would realize(?) [EB. Arnan could not ,and were not SURE that leaders WILL realize what was needed. He had a dream, as well as

personal obsession of being able to build ‘his’ combination/equivalent of “Palmach Arabist Unit” with “101” which will create an iresistable operational capability/opportunity, which, then, will be adopted by the skeptical/hesitant leadership, most of which he thought of being slow, routine fatigued and uninspired/uninspirable officers) EB.]. (the need to

revive and expand the kind of intelligence mission Meir Har-Zion had accomplished on the Golan)EB].

The point of Sayeret Matkal was so that when “his‘ dream will get some flesh and tendons, a compelling opportunity will occur, sooner or later, which will impose the use of The Unit for the tasks he’d destined it for. Even

against the gut feelings of many. Remember , the legendary 101 would have established, if we had not those two battalion size attacks,both resonating failures in I’dna and Falameh back in 53’.

~~that time did come, we would have a unit with the skills, experience and confidence necessary to act~~. I can still remember late-night conversations I had with

Avraham years later, when he reflected on what he would really have liked to do with his life: become an architectist, maybe, or, a film director. He was a mix of rebel, bohemian and romantic. With rich imagination and warm, personal and inspiring charisma. It was not even a ‘follow me’ kind of leadership. Arnan managed to inspire all of us to feel that we are part of

a stimulating, highly promising endeavor. And that ***we***, emphasizing ***us***, as individuals and as a team, ***(rather than himself***) are the crucial links which will cause it happen. Even if a lot of sweat, toil, possibly blood, together with inevitable ups and downs ,hopes and frustrations-will be part of the path towards it. That attitude left us, at 18-21, deeply inspired and motivated.

Everything he did to ensure the establishment, the survival, and finally the success of Sayeret Matkal tapped into both of those qualities.

> The Uunit was born from a pregnancy outside the womb. It came to life, conceived by Arnanwas created as an adjunct to a parent--Unit 154,which didn’t really want the new-born but it was entirely separate. It had no soldiers. Following

two months in Safad, its birth placeIts “headquarters” was moved to a a sparsely furnished Tel Aviv apartment that had been used as a ‘safe house’ for Arab agents and for investigations and briefing planning meetings with Arab agents.. The first ‘normal’, regular army new recruits, were not brought in until nearly two years later., Ii n part because Avraham still had only loose,

tacit approval from military intelligence to try to establish his sayeret. Yet he had a ~~clear~~ vision of the kind of unit he wanted.

((He envisaged a small group, with a special set of skills: physical strength and endurance; tracking, navigation and reconnaissance; a capacity for close-quarters fighting, either with small arms or in unarmed combat. Also, because

they would be operating across the border, the unit’s soldiers would have to be able to function in Arabic, or at least learn to speak the language.))

{At a time of increasingly open resentment among post-1948 immigrants from Yemen or Iraq and especially Morocco and Tunisia, Sayeret Matkal was one of the very few parts of the Israeli military, or Israeli society, where they were

actively sought out highly sppreciated for what they were and that they could bring with them from home and from the language and culture they were absorbed in.A~~a~~nd promoted, up-ward mobiled because if it.}.

Avraham lacked operational experience and couldn’t come to grip with its details. However he had a strong feeling and conviction about the~~Even more important in Avraham’s mind~~

~~were the~~ spirit and ethos he wanted for The Unit.

[EB. the name Sayeret Matkal had been born just before the moving to Sirkin, 18 months later.EB.]

(([EB. These all aspects, you are counting below were ‘developed’ through trial and error along time. Arnan basically had the 2 models you’ve mentioned, and the purpose of establishing a unit

ehich will BRING INTELLIGENCE RESULTS, made of Israeli Jews , based on these two models, that as he well knew worked brilliantly.EB. He felt it needed to project not just self-confidence, but a swagger bordering on arrogance. He envisaged the ideal recruits as iconoclasts. They would have to be smart, but also with an independence of mind. When faced with operational

challenges, he needed them to be able to take the initiative, to figure things out on their own and to act. And while he had no idea himself how to train or command such a force,. EB. To be earased.))

Hhe did have two clear models in mind: the pre-1948 Palmach, especially its, “Arab Platoon”,based on arabic speaking and Arab looking young Jews ,who would operate,

disguised as Arabs, when needed, both for intelligence gathering inside Arab cities and communities, or for operational diversions and surprises. The Second model were ~~and~~ the commandos of Unit 101 and Meir Har-Zion's Company A.

The first officer he summoned to the flat in Tel Aviv was a man named Yitzhak

Shushan, a legendary member of the “Arab platoon” of PalMach.

Syrian born, in his early 30’s. He left Army in 50’ but was involved with both Mossad and Shabak. Arnan wanted to make him the role model for those who will have to get ‘Arabised’.Abu S’kheik could only partially involved and he brought Yair Harary from the same platoon, Sub’khi as he was called,who worked for some time

as a teacher in an Arab village in Syria, under disguise.

He then brought several reservist soldiers of either knowledge of Arabic or some military experience. Daud , from the samr Gilla Family in Jerusalem of my later friend Itzik Gilla. [EB. To add few more. EB]

Among them,Itzhak Gibli, a teenage Palmachnik in 1948 who fought both in Unit 101~~ and Company A~~. Later on Avraham ~~So had the second man~~ he recruited for his core team, the p~~erson~~eople he wanted to train and inspire the first recruits. His name was Mi~~c~~s~~s~~ha Kapusta.

(later ,~~And~~ the final, crowning, addition was Meir Har-Zion himself.

Avraham brought Meir out of retirement and did it for a reason. They were far family relatives , and knew each other. Meir was a sort of national hero at the time, and a role model for youth, surely at all Kibbutzim, Moshavim and fighting units of Zahal. Avraham understood that just bringing him in, will create the buzz and aura of the best next thing within leading

fighting units. Meir's ~~His~~ final operation had come barely a month before the 1956 war, when he was still only twenty-two. He led a commando attack against a Jordanian police fort in Rahwa, near Hebron, on the West Bank, and was shot in his left arm and his throat. The company medic saved his life, but only by performing a battlefield tracheotomy. His speech was affected, and he

still had almost no use of the injured arm. (in fact he joined Kapusta's Sayeret of the Parachutists reservists Brigade of Motta, during Six Days War and fought ,in spite of his constraints, in the battle of Jerusalem.)

In fact, he had come very near to being forced out of the army 18 months earlier. Meir, like Arik Sharon himself, had acquired a reputation for

ignoring the regular chain of military command, and sometimes simply being a law unto himself. That was a quality Avraham was ready [(?)wanted(?)] to embed in his sayeret. It was the seconda ~~major~~ reason he wanted Meir and other Unit 101 vets involved from the start. But it was a quality that, by definition, sometimes defied constraint. In early 1955, Meir's beloved

younger sister, Shoshana, went on a hike with her boyfriend deep onto the Desert of Judea in West Bank, and both werewas killed by Bedouin tribesmen. Two weeks later, Meir took three men from Company A back into the area. They captured six Bedouin. They killed five of them, including a 16-year-old boy. They sent the sixth back to tell the rest of the

tribe what had happened, and why.

Ben-Gurion, though he still held the defense portfolio, was no longer Prime Minister. In what would turn out to be only a two-year hiatus, he had handed the Premiership to his Foreign Minister, Moshe Sharett. Sharett was outraged by Meir’s reprisal mission. He ordered the military police to arrest him and the other

Company A men. They were kept in detention for three weeks as Sharett, Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan argued over whether to charge and try them. In the end, the refusal of Meir or the others to talk about what had happened – and the fear of political fallout from prosecuting the country’s most admired soldier – led to their being released.

When I first met, and trained under, Meir in 1960, he was still a hero to me. We already had a slightly tenuous personal connection: he had been Yigal Garber’s commander in Company A. But being in his presence left me at first almost with a sense of awe. For nearly all Israelis of my generation, his catalogue of exploits – the boyhood hikes into Syria, the trek to Petra

and of course his role in Unit 101 and Battalion 890 – had become the stuff of legend. I understood that a physical blood revenge, ***is*** the rule of the jungle set here by our neighbors,but realised that a ***privately executed*** blood revenge ***can not*** be a rule for a Sovereign State of Israel. So, it is clear ~~*did know*~~ that what he had done to the Bedouin was wrong and punishable. Yet,

I could understand why he had done it.

Thirty ~~But it was not a "reprisal" attack against an enemy force. It was pure, simple murder.~~ y~~Y~~ears later, when as chief-of-staff, I found myself in the same office where Dayan had argued for granting Meir immunity, and once in 92, had Meir, now almost 60, visiting, I could not help asking myself what I would have

done. If someone would have done something similar by now, 1992, he would end up in prison for long time. But, ~~I was certain that, whatever the political considerations, I would have insisted on prosecution and punishment.~~ I had to admit, these (1955')were ~~Yet I became head of the army in the early 1990s. The more difficult question was how I would have handled things in~~

~~the~~ very different times. Under circumstances in which Israel, and Dayan, found themselves in the 1950s ~~and early 1960s~~, with 48’ war so fresh in memory, and the blood boiling in rage, even fear, of Arab atrocities when, however sporadically, ***they*** had the upper hand. It was long before the balance of power shifted dramatically with the Six-Day War of 1967.

Dayan himself best summed up the atmosphere at the time in a powerful graveside speech he delivered in the spring of 1956. He spoke in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz established three years earlier on the border with Gaza. It was an uneasy frontier, with periods of relative calm punctuated by exchanges of fire between Egyptian and Israeli troops and *fedayeen* raids. At the end of

April, a group of Arabs crossed from Gaza and began sheathing down wheat in Nahal Oz’s fields. The kibbutz’s (?)security officer, a 21-year-old Tel Aviv native named Roi Rotberg, rode out on horseback to try to chase them away. But it was a planned ambush. The intruders opened fire when he got close enough, then chased him, beat him, and shot him dead, before taking the body

back into Gaza. It was returned, severely mutilated, later that same day after an Israeli protest relayed through the UN.

With Israeli newspapers full of agonized accounts of what had happened, Dayan went to Rotberg's funeral with the explicit aim of delivering a message to the whole country. He spoke for barely threea minutes. But even as a 14-year-

old, I felt the impact of his words. The eulogy reinforced Dayan’s image as a straight-talker, someone with the eloquence, and courage, to tell us hard but necessary truths. His message was that we should not blame the Arabs for Roi Rotberg’s murder. We should look at ourselves, the brief history of our country, and the neighborhood where we lived. “Why should we talk about their

burning hatred for us?” he asked. “For eight years, they have been sitting in the refugee camps of Gaza, while before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages where they and their fathers dwelt.” Of course they hated us, and the state we had established and were seeking to build. In Dayan’s view, the reason for Rotberg’s death was that he~~he~~ had allowed

himselfhimself to be “blinded by the light in his heart... The yearning for peace deafened his hears, and he did not hear the voice of murder waiting in ambush.” The danger, he said, was that other Israelis had become similarly naive. “How did we shut our eyes, and refuse to see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation?” A generation, he said, (insinuating the

resemblance to biblical Joshua Ben Noon, whose mission was to conquer the Land of ISRAEL), which was settling the land but which “without the steel helmet and the barrel of the riflecannon, will not succeed in planting a tree or building a home.”

* * *

I was part of the second group of recruits to join Sayeret Matkal. There were ten of us in all, bringing the unit up to a grand total of twenty odd of fighting soldiers and some fifteen reservists. But at least it now had a home, if only in a corner of a former RAF base. It had a number, as all units had. It was unit 269. It ‘adopted’, without any formal approval, a self-

elevating ‘name’ of a sort “sayeret Matkal”. Which pro forma, was destined to project a veiled uninteresting identity, but carried a flavor of elite and mistery which did the opposite (probably deliberately).~~been officially recognized as a sayeret, not attached to a specific army unit like the others but directly to the head of military intelligence, and~~

~~ultimately the chief of staff, in Tel Aviv.~~ What it still lacked was an agreed role, much less approval to carry out any operational missions.

In Avraham Arnan’s mind, our role, under his vision, was to build a Hybrid. A chimera. An ‘Arab Platoon’-like ~~clear. We would be a mobile, cross-border intelligence unit. We were not a fighting force. If a mission went to plan, we would be in~~

~~and out of Syria, or Jordan, or Egypt before anyone knew we had even been there. But he saw the *ability* to fight as a core part of the sayeret's identity. He wanted us to be the toughest, and the most rigorously trained, unit in the entire army, with an attitude that said: we know we are the best.~~

~~For all of these reasons,~~ 101 Unit. In this regard h~~h~~is decision to draft in, his trio

of Unit 101 veterans was a master stroke, Meir Har-Zion in particular. [EB.a little bit repetitive.

And remember, Avraham didn't need MHZ for his navigating or fighting skills. The man was deeply wounded/handicaped, he could hardly do any of those. But MHZ could, even by just guiding and overseeing the training and operational skils to be acquired, give it an

indelible ‘seal of quality’, which Avraham didn’t have the posture or ‘weight’ to provide.

And the very readiness of MHZ to participate in the building of this new unit, with no record ,whatsoever was a great contribution of prestige , and actual traction, within the toughest contest of all, The contest for the best people, where the choice is ultimately, theirs.EB.]~~No one~~

~~in Israel was better at sneaking back and forth across our borders. No one was more familiar with the terrain, from the Galilee to the Negev, and with the hills and streams and wadis that lay on the other side~~. But MHZ~~he~~, (Gibli, was just a joyful, good soldier, not a commander) ,~~and~~ Kapusta and Errol(who came in about the time I’ve showed up). were al~~so~~ tough, brash battlefield

commandesoldiers, with the experience and the scars to prove it.

Since we were not conceived as a Unit with a detailed tasks or definitionsas a fighting force, we tried to prepare ourself to be Israeli version of the British SAS, and though being somewhat different fromwere different from Unit 101,. But we were molded in its image. I was the only

experienced lock-picker among the dozen young recruits who joined in the spring of 1960. But the others had been approached in the much same way as I was: by word of mouth, trusted friends recommending trusted friends, in my case beginning with my kibbutz classmate Avraham AmRamon, who had joined the sayeret a six months year earlier. It was the same way Sharon had hand-picked

the original fighters in 101. But he did it within weeks, send them to fight within days , and closed the unit and integrated it into the Parachutists 890 batallion in six months, with Company a, under MHZ, its extension. The pace was so swift that MHZ did never enrolled Officer’s School. Arik argued and Dayan agreed, that he had nothing to learn there and 101 can not

afford having him for 6 months out from action. MHZ turned from NCO to an Officer by just getting the rank from Arik. _ Sayeret Matkal was conceived as a long term project. And although we were an intelligence sayeret, we trained as commandos. Even by the standards of Unit 101 or Company A, the regimen was _ quite grueling. Our weapons training included not only the

standard Uzi, perfect for cross-border operations because it was small and almost impervious to sand, rain and mud. But a variety of WW II weapons and even Soviet made Kalashnikovs, Gurionov machine guns and RPGs. [EB. That's two years later.We also built makeshift silencers, which had all the elegance of old automobile mufflers and ~~but~~ hardly did the job.EB]. We got

to work~~ed~~ with fuses , booby traps, mine clearing detonators and explosives. And we trained in different modes of fighting, open areas, fortified well trenched strongholds, built areas. And a lot of raids-like exercises on air fields, command posts, fortified buildings etc.We even had a 10 days long training with navy small rubber boats, and small vessels, learning to raid

through the sea, to swim wiyh full gear and life saving belts and to survive.

But more than anything else, on the way to all above mentioned missions, and on weeks devoted just for it, we m~~M~~ostly walked., we *walked*. Marched. Trekked. For hundreds of miles, most of them at night, with light or heavy ~~fully stocked~~ backpacks, according to mission. We

perfected night navigation skills. The standard was that we had to learn/memorize the map at daytime by heart and were not suppose to use the map or lit a match or battery hand light over it, unless in emergency. ~~Before setting off, we would study a map of the area where we were going, committing every town or village or landmark to memory~~.

Meir’s rule of thumb was that

in order to be truly prepared for an operation, you would need to spend at least “an hour for an hour” – an equal time mastering the lay of the land to the amount you’d spend in carrying out the mission itself.

> The most frustrated element in our experience was the practical absence of real fighting , special forces, or even intelligence operations.

We were idly training. The post-Uri Ilan incident/ post 56’ Clash - reluctance to approve cross borders operations was still alive and well felt. Twice or three times a year a totally remote area along one of the neighboring borders, the Syrian border NOT included ,was chosen for a set of 4-5, one night penetrations several miles into the Neighbor’s territory. All the

Sayarot and all TZanhanim and Golani batallions competed for the very little that was there to share. It did not satisfy neither our apetite nor our needs for experience or adventure. We listened to Avraham reading to us from MHZ notebooks, his diary of his youth and 101 adventures.We knew that some of our officers, without mentioning it to us, Tobul and Yori or Avinoam were

once in a while crossing the border for a private trip. Not to mention MHZ, who while in The Unit started training a Donkey in low stream crossings to prepare a trip he planned with Kapusta to the Roman ancient city of Baal Bek , in the Beka’a Valley in Lebanon. It was such a long shot I would not have believe they really planned it, till Iv’e looked at MHZ booknote, which Arnan had

in his office and asked Kapusta who verified it were true, that both of them crossed the Jordanian border, 5 years ago and went alone on foot to the Roman site of Jarash. (Three days and nights). ~~ban on Israeli soldiers crossing our borders without explicit approval was still in place~~. We ignored it. In small groups~~, we practiced sneaking across into Lebanon, on to the West Bank or~~

~~into Sinai and back again. Despite the fact that there appeared no immediate chance we'd actually be asked to use any of these skills, we even went through the meticulous process of planning a series of operations, including combat missions. The first of them involved plotting how to cross onto the West Bank and blow up a dozen aircraft in the formerly British – now~~

~~Jordanian – airport in Qalandia, on the road north from Jerusalem.~~

Exactly as Avraham intended, our trio of commando veterans helped give us not just the operational tools. They were there for their attitude as well.

~~Gibli had been shot and wounded during a retaliation operation in 1954. He was captured by the Jordanians and,~~

~~until his release, kept in solitary confinement and tortured. The details of his imprisonment, the beatings and the cigarette burns, were lurid, but he would always end by saying that only one thing had really mattered: he had kept his mouth shut~~. Kapusta was our guide on a series of punishing day-night trek~~s~~ through the Negev. Though Avraham would occasionally see

us off at the start, or join us trekking for half a day or so, ~~and then drive down to meet us at the end,~~ usually he remained back at the sayeret base. In a couple of the early several days treks~~exercises~~, we relied on carrier pigeons to keep in touch with the Base~~him~~ – until Kapusta began killing them for dinner. Once, on a searingly hot desert afternoon, he spotted a poisonous snake. He

found a two pieces of wood and gently pried its head up from the sand. He grabbed its neck from behind, and calmly strangled it.

Meir exuded a similar self-confidence, but was less flamboyant. He chose his words carefully. Partly, this was because of the after-effects of the tracheotomy. But it was also in his nature. As a youngster, he had not only

wandered the length and breadth of Palestine, and beyond. He wrote a fascinating diary of his youth and his young commander‘s adventures, and tried even poetry. ~~Since leaving the army, he was writing again, and would eventually publish a memoir of his time commanding Company A.~~ When he did talk, it was often to make a point about the difference between success and

failure, or life and death, on real operations. [EB. This story of Petra belongs to my preperations for 1st Sinai Op.EB] Two years later MHZ joined me, now an officer and the leader of a team preparing our 1st Sinai operation, to the Arava valley facing Edom Mts. The site of Petra. I was working on a solution for the camouflage of our activities on the ground. WE could see Waddi

Mussa entrance where so many were killed by Bedouins on their attempt to reach Petra or on the way back. Much Deeper, further and higher we could see the peak of Gebel Harun, (Mt. Aharon, Moses brother), from which MHZ and Rachel S. made their way. MHZ told me in details the whole story. I was impressed by his humble openness re garding his role in this legendary trek. All the

credit , he said ,goes to Svoray, I hardly followed her. She is 5’4” he is 6’4”. But that eas the truth. MHZ argued sheBut sometimes, usually late at night, he would open up about what his own experiences – not just in 101, but his childhood walks and the trek to Petra – had taught him about the importance of sticking together,sticking to a mission you took upon yourself whatever

hardships you face and looking out for one another. He never mentioned the blood revenge, ~~reprisal murders~~ after Shoshana's death, and I never ~~none of us~~ asked. I ~~That was mostly because we~~ assumed he wouldn't talk about it. Her ~~still obviously felt her~~ loss deeply affected him. Since leaving the army, he had built a farm, some 700 acres, ~~house~~ on a steep hill in the north,

overlooking the Jordan Valley. He had named it Shoshana Estate. Still, I regret not at least trying to ask him about it. I liked Meir from the outset. We became closer as the sayeret training progressed. A tradition started by Avraham, who looked for a way to compensate Meir for his time spent on The Unit, and also to expose ‘his’ soldiers to this exemplary figure, that at least

twice a year each team, at the beginning the whole teams togrther will spend a week working on Ahuzat Shoshana, living there and working from sunrise to sunset building the many miles of barbed wire fences that wewe supposed to hold the herds of cattle within given segments of the farm slopes. It was a demanding work, which took several years , ell into my term as

team commander and beyond. Neither the tractor, nor MHZ's Landrover, could not reach the places. So we had to carry the elements of the fence and the tools to drive it into the ground on our backs. Even today, 55 years later, when I come there I can see MY segments of the fence. Still there.~~On weekends, a group of us would often go up the farm and, stone by stone, help him~~

~~build the outer wall around the property.~~

As part of our other specialist training, we also studied Arabic. Well over half of the recruits to the embryonic unit were Sephardi Jews, who already spoke the language. But the rest of us were divided up between a pair of tutors, one specializing in the dialect which was spoken in Syria and Lebanon, and the

other in Egyptian Arabic vocabulary and pronunciation. I was in the Egyptian group. Our teacher was a Cairo-born Jew named Amin. He was a lovely man and, in part because he loved and was good at~~also a~~ mathemat~~ician~~ and a played the violin~~ianist~~, we hit it off immediately. He was also deaf in one ear. We often had to raise our voices~~shout~~ so he could hear us. Languages, to

put it mildly, have never been my forte. Even in Hebrew, I have a slight lisp, and that made mastering Arabic even harder. Still, Amin would often compliment me on my accent, at which point the others in the class would joke that I was lucky he was hard of hearing. And they were right.

We not only studied the language. We looked for opportunities to test our

ability to mix with genuine Arabic-speakers without being found out. When we were in the Base, oOne evening each week, we went to a movie theater in southern Tel Aviv which showed Egyptian films. Afterwards, we'd grab a bite at a restaurant run by an Arab family and, in my case by saying as little as possible, converse in sufficiently good

Arabic to blend in with the regulars.

The single toughest week of training came about six or seven months in.[EB. We have to think how to put it.] (The fate of Uri Ilan was always in the back of our minds)[not true.EB]. After all, it was the reason it had taken Avraham so long to get approval to set up the sayeret, and for the continuing reluctance to

countenance our actually launching a cross-border operation. It was also a reminder of the potential dangers if we actually did so.]EB.]

It was a preparation for being enemy prisoners. A training given at the time only to Air Force pilots and special forces (Shayetet 13 and The Unit). We were given classroom instruction on what to do if we

fell into enemy hands. The basics were to tell them your name, your rank and serial number. Nothing else. Then there were sessions about what being captured was really like. Gibli led the first one. He started by rehearsing what had happened to him in Jordan. Gibli had been shot and wounded during a retaliation operation in 1954. He was captured by the Jordanians and, until his

release, kept in solitary confinement and tortured. The details of his imprisonment, the beatings and the cigarette burns, as well as relationships with some of his guards which budded somehow, out of the human contact however assymetrical. The stories were lurid, but he would always end by saying that only one thing had really mattered: he had kept his mouth shut about any

miltary info. Yudke Tadjer who spent seven years on Iraqi Prison , was another one.

Partly because we were developing a bit of swagger ourselves – but mostly, I think, to hide the discomfort of wondering how each of us would react if we were captured and tortured – we began heckling him over an account that seemed to get more heroic with each retelling. But we

heard his message: surviving, and not talking, would be down not just to physical endurance, but to strength of mind.

A few weeks later, the whole sayeret held a four-day navigation exercise in the Galilee. On the second night, about four in the morning, we shook off our backpacks, unrolled our sleeping bags, and settled in for a couple of hours’ sleep. The first thing

that I heard was angry shouting, in Arabic. I sat up and saw a guy hovering over me, his face covered, ordering me in Arabic to keep my mouth shut. He put handcuffs on my hands, a burlap sack over my head, tied it tight, yanked me to me feet, and led me off. We were piled into the back of a truck. From whispered comments with the others, interrupted by further shouted warnings and

slaps on the back of the head, I could tell that all of the squads which I was part of, twenty oddfive of us in all, had been taken together.

We were driven, sometimes on the road, sometimes jostling over potholes and rocks, for nearly fourthree hours. Whenever we said anything, someone shouted at us. Twice, even though I'd said nothing, I got an open-handed slap across

the face, more painful because of the burlap. I kept telling myself that this *had* to be part of our training. If it was for real, we'd be more badly beaten, maybe dead. Still, I couldn't be completely sure.

Finally, the truck pulled to a stop. We were led into a building, down a hallway, then into a large room. It was white and bare except for a series of iron rings on the far wall. Our

captors ripped the sacks from our heads and used thick wire to tie our wrists to the manacles. They were shouting orders at us in Arabic-accented Hebrew now. For the first six or seven hours we were kept together, arms shackled and raised. Then they took us away, one by one, hands cuffed in front of us. I was the last to go. I was led to a cell-like room, so small there was not

even a cot. At first, they left me there. It wasn’t until the last shaft of life disappeared from the slit-like window near the top of wall that the first interrogator showed up. He unlocked the door, entered, unfolded a metal chair and sat down. He said there would be no chair for me. No sitting, or lying down. He wanted answers: what unit was I from, what did it do, who were our commanders,

what were our orders in case of war, and what was our role in an Israeli attack.

I told him my name, rank and serial number. After each question, I repeated them, or just shook my head in silence.

“You *will* answer, sooner or later” he shouted, slapping me across the face. “All of you will.”

For four days and nights, a series of other interrogators

shouted out the same questions. I was slapped dozens of times. Punched in the stomach. One of our captors uncuffed me and bent my arm sharply behind my back, twisting my wrist upward. I tried not to scream, but grunted in pain. Over and over, I told myself: “This is not for real. They can hurt me. But they have limits. He can bend my wrist. But he can’t *break* my wrist.”

But if it was torture, the toughest part was mental. I was not allowed to sleep. The captors never left me alone for more than a half-hour, and if I was crouching, or worse lying on the stone floor, I would be yanked to my feet, punched or slapped, and ordered to remain standing. Food and drink were sparse, and delivered only irregularly, whenever one of the interrogators decided.

Twice a day, I was led out of the cell to a primitive toilet and given a minute to relieve myself.

There were only two changes in the routine. On a few occasions, the five of us were brought back together in the large room and told that we wouldn’t be let go until we had given them more of what they wanted – the implication being that some of us had already

talked. And once or twice, back in my cell, the interrogators altered things by sending in a good cop. “I can *help* you,” he kept saying. “I can get you out. But you have to give me *something*.”

I did feel a tiny sense of victory two days into the ordeal, when I figured out where we’d been taken. The first clue came from the fact that the scale of the building,

and the rooms where we were being held, made it obvious we were in some kind of castle-like structure. If we were still in Israel, that could only mean we were in one of the so-called Tegart fortresses built by the British. But there were several dozen of them around the country, mostly used as police or army installations. Standing painfully on my tiptoes,

looking out through my cell window, I could see a tree-covered hill in the distance. Nearer to us was a patch of farmland, being worked by men and women with hoes and a horse-drawn plow. No land in 1960s Israel was farmed that way. I figured I had to be looking across into Lebanon from near the northern border.

Still, the only real victory was, when it was over, knowing

that I'd held up. I hadn't talked. None of us had. We didn't fool ourselves into thinking that meant we could necessarily hold up in genuine captivity: where they could really break your wrist, or burn your chest with cigarettes, rip out a fingernail or a tooth, or kill you. But we agreed that the main value had been to give us some sense of what we might

face. If we did face it, at least we'd be more prepared for what was coming. We might still be afraid, but at least it would no longer be a fear of the unknown.

Challenging though the training was, I found every bit of it enthralling. After occasional weekends back in Mishmar Hasharon, I could hardly wait to return to the base. This was all the more

remarkable because Sayeret Matkal had still yet to carry out a single mission. If anyone other than Avraham had been in charge, I think the unit might have unraveled. Even if it had survived, it would have lost the cutting edge necessary to succeed once it was called on to do anything. The fact that neither of these things happened was not because of anything specific Avraham said

to us. It was because of the *ethos* he created. The uniform he chose for the sayeret reflected his vision: camouflage dress, with our unit insignia hidden on the inside flap of our breast pocket, and the dark red beret of Meir’s paratroop brigade commandos. But we almost never wore uniforms. Mostly, we were in sandals and shorts. We called

each other by our first names, even the officers.

The combination of the informality, the rigor of our training and the encouragement we received to believe that we were different, and frankly better, than other units created an extraordinarily close bond. I felt it with all of the soldiers in the sayeret, but became especially close to a guy named Uri Zakay. He

arrived a few months after me. Yet he was a few months older, had joined the army a few months earlier and, in some ways, came better prepared. We had both been in *Gadna Sayerim* as teenagers, but he had joined the further course needed to become a squad leader. He also studied Arabic in high school, and after his *tironut* had joined a unit in charge of military administration for

Bedouin areas of the Negev. He was short, stocky and strong, with a lively mind and an easygoing manner. And as we soon established, we even had an indirect, pre-sayeret tie. His paternal grandfather David Zakay, an early leader in the Labor Zionist trade union movement, was also an ~~internationally respected~~ astronomer who wrote a regular column in Davar. When I was a

youngster on the kibbutz, it was ~~amy favorite~~ part of the paper I ve been looking at, even though I frequently couldn’t understand half of it.

At the end of our first year’s training in the sayeret, in April (Pesach of) 1961, the two of us decided to take a 4~~10~~-day trek along the southern border and cross the border at a point we chose in advance. We started at the middle of Arava

Valley headed west to the IL-Egypt border ~~We began at the bottom end of the Gaza Strip and, hugging the frontier,~~ walked all the way to Eilat at the top of the Red Sea. On Pesach Seider's evening~~That afternoon~~, after spending some two hours of observation and screening of the landscape to make sure we know were the EGYPTIAN CLOSE OBSERVATION/ CHECKPOSTS ARE, AND WHERE ARE

THE SOLDIERS THERE. We crossed the border, after dark and~~we~~ began scaling one of jagged peaks to the north west of Eilat, a couple of miles Beyond/into ~~from~~ the Egyptian border and overlooking an area called Moon Valley in the Sinai. The moon was ~~nearly~~ full, as it is is always on Pesach 1st night, when we reached the top. The desert valley below was spectacularly

beautiful. We spent an hour ~~After nightfall the following day, we crossed into Sinai, through Moon Valley and camped overnight~~ on the~~a~~ desert peak on the Egyptian side. It was the first time either of us had been outside of Israel.We were trained special forces soldiers, with our weapons, we searched the area well with our binoculars, so it was not frightening , yet tense and on

high adrenalin. Of course, Our freelance excursion across the border was against a whole battery of army regulations. But We felt as if we passed a self imposed ‘adulthood ritual’, taking the responsibility for a border crossing. I ~~Yet i~~t was perfectly in ~~keepin~~the~~g with the~~ spirit of The Unit, at the time, Avraham probably wanted to

instill~~, and expected,~~ in his sayeret.

Especially in those first few years, the sayeret often felt less like an army unit than an American college fraternity. Or like being back with Ido and Moshe plotting teenage capers on the kibbutz. Twice each year, we organized elaborate feasts in cavernous former RAF hangar on the edge of our little compound. One

came at the end of the year. Its purpose, or excuse, was vintage Avraham Arnan. It was to mark the day in December 1957(8?) when he had moved into the unit's "base" in the apartment in Tel Aviv. The other, even larger, festival was in the spring. We called it *Chag ha Pri*: the Feast~~Holiday~~ of the Fruit. For weeks beforehand, we would mount nighttime raids on various

kibbutzim in the center and north of Israel, liberating crates of nearly every kind of fruit imaginable. Also chicken and lamb, if we got lucky. The one unspoken rule was that none of us would steal from our own kibbutzim.

Avraham always invited an unsuspecting selection of senior officers whom he knew from headquarters. A few of them would even get into the

spirit of the occasion, none more so than David Elazar, who was known in the army by his nickname, Dado. He was a close friend of Avraham, and it helped that he had been hisa Palmach commander in 1948. The Palmach had held similar foodfests with delicacies “ “ “grabbed” was the term used(“borrowed”) from nearby kibbutzim. In the early 1970s, Dado went on to become army

chief of staff. Now, he was in charge of the armored corps, which was a particular benefit to the sayeret. We were always short of gasoline for our training exercises, and Dado would divert surplus supplies to us from his tank units.

Most of the other army commanders, however, were more awkward guests. I still remember the look on the face of Haim Laskov, who was then

chief of staff, since Dayan had left the army and joined Ben-Gurion’s cabinet. I couldn’t help smiling when I saw him looking on in shock, mixed with what seemed to me a helpless urge to flee, at the pyramids of oranges and avocados and mangoes and watermelons we had assembled for the evening. I could almost hear a voice inside his head: these people

are Israeli *soldiers*. They're *stealing* all this stuff.

I had made a special contribution to this particular *Chag ha Pri*, on the express order of Avraham himself. He decided that especially if Laskov was attending, we needed something "special" on show.

[EB.,not accurate. Laskov was in Dec60'. I ended Officers school by May62' and got a team on October 62' so the Billboard

story belongs to Either Dec 62’ or July 63’.He told me he had seen the perfect thing: an advertizing billboard at Geha, the major junction on the coastal road north of Tel Aviv, with a huge drawing of Samson holding an automobile tire in each hand. “We need to have it, Ehud,” he said. “Take a team with you and bring it back.”

We began with a series of reconnaissance visits, then a

midnight operation during which we loosened the screws on each of the billboard's six large metal panels. The next night, we finished the job, carting it away and reassembling it at the entrance to the hangar.[This Samson story should be put at proper time context. Belongs to late 63'.EB.]

Fortunately, Laskov had left office by the time we decided the sayeret needed a kind of

clubhouse: a place where we could meet, bring friends, drink coffee, talk, argue, laugh. It was modeled on a Middle Eastern *diwan*, with carpets on the floor and equally colorful cloth decorations on the walls. Ordinarily, a new army construction project required approval from headquarters, after which we would be given the funds and materials to

build it. We did things differently. Each of us was given a specific role: design, construction planning, electricity, quality-control. We fanned out in teams all around Tel Aviv to secure the materials necessary. First, we had identified a promising construction site. We would then either break in at night or have one member of the team distract the security guards

while the rest of us collected bricks, cement or other material.

Not only was all of this against army regulations. It was against the law. At least one of our squad members Ron Levy~~officers~~, later chief psychologist of the IDF,with whom I became good friends, refused to participate. “I admire~~like~~ Avraham,” he said. “But this is *wrong*. It is

against the law. He can not give us such orders, and Im going to refuse it if I get one.” I admired him for that. He never got an order. Still, I couldn’t help enjoying it. All of us, even my friend, understood(?), the fun, feeling of adventure, the Palmach legacy we all new from our Kibbutzim had blinded our still immature judgement that we are acting criminally. the purpose

behind it: to sustain the idea of an elite, operational unit, with the ability to improvise and take initiative, to elude obstacles and challenges without being discovered, at a time when the sum total of Sayeret Matkal’s *real* operations was zero.

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Finally, there were signs that this might change. It was largely due to a shakeup at the top of the army. For much of the 1950s, Moshe Dayan's right-hand-man had been a Haganah veteran named Meir Amit. When it came time to name Laskov's successor as chief of staff in 1961, Amit, 41, was very much in the mix. At that point, he was head of operations, in effect the number-two man in

the Israeli military. But the top job went instead to Tzvi Tzur, Laskov’s deputy. So rather than stay on as head of operations, Amit decided to accept the post of head of military intelligence.

He proved the perfect man for the job. For years, he had been helping to run the entire army. He knew the importance of intelligence, and the costs of being taken by surprise. He was

charming, energetic, self-confident and very bright. He also had clout. If, in his judgement, the time had finally come to revive cross-border intelligence missions, the chances were that it would happen.

It not take him long to come to that judgement. He had been at Dayan's side(?) when the first reports came in about the Uri Ilan capture. He knew about

our checkered record ever since in trying to find alternative ways to get intercept information. His first major move upon taking over in intelligence had been to authorize the attempt to plant the bugging device in Gaza – the mission that ended with the disappearance of our “top agent” and our latest bugging equipment. So the *next* operation, he decided, would be

carried out by Israeli soldiers, trained and drilled and briefed by Israeli officers. In effect, that marked the real start of Sayeret Matkal.

The operations themselves were still some time coming. Yet by the autumn of 1961, things began to move. The irony was that Avraham was not around to see it. He was spending a year away at Israel’s military

staff college. His temporary replacement was Yoseph Castel, commander of the Golani Brigade. He lacked Avraham’s flair. But he did have a glittering military record, obvious steadiness and competence. He had been with us only a month or so when he called me in, along with three other of the young recruits and our most operationally experienced commander, a

Sepharadic Jew, born in Haifa, and graduated from the young “Militarry college adjacent to the leading high school in Haifa, ~~Yemeni~~ named Yechiel Amsalem. He delivered the news we’d been waiting for. Amit had decided to start running Israeli intelligence operations across our borders. Nothing was imminent. But the technology unit had been working to improve the hardware. Though a

finished product was still probably a year away, they were working on an alternative to the kind of device MHZ squad ~~we'd been trying to~~ mounted on telephone poles on the Golan. They were developing a unit we could attach directly onto the main underground communications cable used by Egyptian military in the Sinai. Castel told Amsalem and our team to begin

preparing for such an operation.

He sent us first to Tel Aviv, where we were installed as “apprentices” by Israel’s national telephone company.

After workshop ~~classroom~~ preparation on how communications cables worked, and how cables are structured, opened , welded , connected and closed, we were assigned, along with real working teams

~~trainees,~~ to the hub controlling most of the phone lines for the central third of Israel. We spent a month there, exercising~~learning~~, through routine maintenance and repairs, how to open the tar wrapping around the cables, cut through the steel meshing, then remove another, softer shield and get into individual wires~~. After work, we freelanced on the equipment~~. We practiced

connecting a prototype “T exit” apparatus, supplied by the technology unit and designed to allow us to join existing wires, one by one, to an intercept cable that would connect to a transmitter.

The main challenge was going to be getting into the Sinai, installing the equipment and getting out again without the Egyptians knowing we’d been there. The initial training

exercise for that part of the operation was held in the Negev. We pitted ourselves against Israel's dedicated Bedouin/Israeli tracking and reconnaissance unit, known as *Shaked*. And we ended up looking a lot less like a crack *sayeret* than the Keystone(?) Kops. The entire sayeret participated. We split into smaller squads, including our "Sinai" unit under Amsalem. Each group was

ferried in at night by helicopter to a different part of the desert,within the ‘playing field’ of the day, which was about 30 on 40 miles big and changed/ different one every night. For our deep disappointment on every morning all of the ~~The other~~ teams were tracked and discovered within three~~an~~ hours after sunrise. Only exception was~~And~~ ours, on the third night, never even got

started. We were dropped a dozen miles from where we were supposed to be, so far off course that the area wasn’t even on our maps.

> ~~Back at the base, we took apart and reassembled so much cable that I had the satisfaction of knowing that, when I left the army, I’d at least have a fallback career with the phone company~~.[EB. Confusion in time line. The

following description of finding solutions for the Challenge took place two years later, when I led my team and prepared for 1st Sinai OP.EB]

Every few weeks, we headed back into the desert. Not against *Shaked*. It was clear we'd need much more training, and a more sophisticated strategy, to avoid detection. We focused on finding ways to disguise the traces of our movements on the

open sand, by taking indirect routes, doubling back, and creating a series of false trails.

The operation itself was still many months away. Any doubt about that vanished when we held our first meeting with the technological unit, to get a look at the equipment we were meant to take into Egypt. It may have been a sophisticated piece of machinery. But it was

not a triumph of miniaturization. It looked like a refrigerator-freezer. In order to ensure transmission of the intercepted conversations back into Israel, the designers had also come up with an underground Yagi antenna nearly 300 feet long.

None of this dampened my excitement over finally beginning to train for something besides stealing

fruit,(or a billboard, will be stolen much later.EB]). But I was approaching the end of my required period of military service. I realized I had to think through what I would do next. My instinct was to stay on. My nearly two years in Sayeret Matkal had been physically by far the toughest in my life. But also the most fulfilling, inspiring, and fun. The last thing I wanted to do

was to forfeit the chance to be part of our first real operational action.

Staying on, however, meant a commitment to spending at least a few more years pursuing a military career. That presented a problem. Though I would never have traded my time in the sayeret for an APC unit in Beersheva, if I had I done so I would by now have taken a step toward becoming an officer. It

was known as *kurs makim*. It taught the basics of leading a ~~small~~ squad of 10-12 soldiers in all types of battle, and was the first rung up the ladder. That part of the army, like the rest, was something Sayeret Matkal didn’t bother with. But if I was going to remain in uniform, in the sayeret and especially in another part of the army, I knew I wanted to be giving orders, not just

following them. I was now well behind other candidates my age in the requirements for becoming an officer. Amsalem thought I’m a capable soldier , but that if I want to turn officer I should join Sayeret Golani ur Tzanhanim, not The Unit. Others in the sayeret, like our unit commanders (except for Yori and Tubul), were already officers when they arrived. Even my friend Uri

Zakay, after his service with military administration in the Negev, had completed *kurs makim*. In fact he'd taken one of the toughest and most thorough versions on offer in the whole army, with the Golani Brigade. Now, he was about to enter officers' school.

I went to see Castel. I told him I realized I had missed out on *kurs makim*. But I too was determined to enter officers'

school, after which I hoped I could return to the sayeret. Castel didn’t refuse me permission outright. But he told me he was skeptical. At the very least, I would first have to pass the army exam exempting me from the need to do *kurs makim*. Even then, he wasn’t sure I’d be ready.

This was the first time since ignoring my father’s advice on the regional high

school that I felt the need to argue my case, and stand my ground, against a figure of authority.[EB. There was another case with Avraham, when he tried to send me to special morse code course.EB] I told Castel that I'd given it a lot of thought. "I know you've got doubts," I said. "I respect that. But I have to know your answer, as soon as possible. Because if it's no, I'll need

time to go through the appeal process to see whether I can convince them. Even if it means leaving the *sayeret* and having to go to another unit.” He was quiet for a few moments. “Give me a couple of days,” he said. “I’ll think it over.”

When he called me back into his office, he said that if I *could* pass the screening exam, I could go on the officers’

training course. I did, and he kept his word.

In terms of distance, I didn’t have to go far. The officers’ school was just on the other side of our base. Yet when I joined Uri and the other 150 candidates there in November 1961, it didn’t take me long to realize how much ground I had to make up.